Interview with Rudolph Aggrey

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AMBASSADOR RUDOLPH AGGREY

Interviewed by: Jack O'Brien

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Q: My name is Jack O'Brien and I'm about to interview a man I've known and respected for along time. He's known to all of us as Rudy Aggrey, but more properly as Ambassador Rudolph Aggrey. He's had a remarkable career, and one that has made him, certainly, one of the most distinguished African American public servants of our time, I would say.

Rudy, I think that you started on a bitter note. Would you mind telling us how you overcame that?

AGGREY: Well, I wouldn't say it was really a bitter note. I guess it was just, sort of—it's indicative of the times and of some of the vicissitudes that our country has come through. I sought a position with the United States Government in the late-1940s, early-'50s, because I had written a civil service examination for a position as an information specialist. I got good scores on that examination and I went to Washington for interviews.

I was told, at that time, that, although I'd passed the examination, that I was not going to be hired in the domestic branch of the Department of State. And some friends got wind of this development and contacted officials in the Department of State, who decided to look into it. The end of that effort was that it came to the attention of the Secretary of State, who

was then Dean Acheson, through his special assistant, who was Lucius Battle. And the word came down, from the secretary through Lucius Battle, that the man is qualified, he should be hired.

This word came down to the domestic branch, but it also came to the attention of persons managing information and education programs for the Foreign Service, who interviewed me, who felt not only that I was qualified for domestic service, but they wanted to recruit me for overseas service and offered me the option of either Rangoon, Burma, Singapore, or Lagos, Nigeria, because I had some African background on my father's side.

Q: Would you please explain that a bit more?

AGGREY: My father was J.E. Kwegyir Aggrey, who came to America from Ghana at the turn of the century to be educated in the United States, in fact, at Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina. He met my mother, who was from Virginia. They were married and had four children. He became an outstanding educator; made one of the first educational surveys of the African continent. In fact, he helped make two as a part of the Phelps-Stokes commissions, and established Achimota College in Ghana. But he also had a career in the United States at Livingstone College, where he taught and where my mother also taught.

So I grew up in an international home, with visits, frequently, from persons from Africa. But not only from Africa, but from all parts of the world, because North Carolina, in the 1930s and '40s, when I was growing up, was a racially segregated situation. And often, the people who were not white, who came to North Carolina, stayed with the Aggreys if they were African, Oriental or whatever, or at least they came to see us. So early on I had an international orientation and interest.

So when it came time for me to say yes or no to whether I would submit an application for the Foreign Service, as a staff officer, I could find no one to help me say no and everyone to help me say yes. And finally, I opted for Lagos, Nigeria.

Q: Now you were there from what period to what period?

AGGREY: From 1951 to 1953, a little over two years on post.

Q: Now that was a small post in those days. You had more than one title?

AGGREY: Well, it was a small post. It was a consulate general. It was before independence. It was one of the pioneer USIA posts in Africa. And it had been a one-American post before I arrived. I arrived as a second American, shortly to be joined by a third, who was the secretary. But two months after I arrived, the public affairs officer, who was Brent Null, left to be transferred to Spain. And I was appointed as acting public affairs officer two months after my arrival in my first post. And I held that position for maybe nine months before another public affairs officer arrived, who was Jack Jones.

Q: That must have established some kind of record there. After Lagos, you were assigned where?

AGGREY: After Lagos I was assigned, first, to Strasbourg, and then to Lille, in France, as a part of the very important United States Information Office Agency operation in France at that time. And I had the pleasure of working for three different country PAOs, first for Bill Koren, then for Lee Brady, and finally for Bill Cody. And I think that each of them, in their own way, contributed a great deal to my growth and development. And I must say that each of them allowed me to do what I was able to do. And I had wonderful experiences and keep very, very fond memories of the days in Paris and in France.

Q: At some point, was there a question about your fluency in French?

AGGREY: In Nigeria there was a question about my ability to serve in France, when I applied to go to France. When I came back after the Nigerian assignment, I didn't know exactly where I was going. I was told, “Well, you want to go to Europe but you don't speak French.” And I asked that I be tested because I had had an interesting experience.

When I was in graduate school, my master's degree was held up for six months because, reportedly, I had not passed a French reading examination. I vowed that I would never fail another French examination, and I spent six months preparing for that exam. And while I was in Lagos, I studied French with a tutor. Before I came into the Foreign Service, I took special conversational French courses at Brooklyn College.

Q: Now while you were in France, you were—I don't know whether you were established—but you were director of the youth affairs office there.

AGGREY: Yes.

Q: And that was unusual. I don't think we had such an office in most posts. I know we didn't. How did that come about?

AGGREY: Well, it was the first of several offices. And I think they were established in London, and perhaps in Beirut, and one or two other posts thereafter. It came about because Lee Brady, who was country public affairs officer in France while I served in Lille, visiting the post, saw that I paid particular attention to students and youth in the program that we carried out there. And he felt that was a public USIA should address especially and with more thought and programming.

So when an opportunity came, he appointed me as the first youth activities officer in Paris. And in 1954 I began that program there.

Q: Well, that must have brought you a lot of satisfaction.

AGGREY: It brought me a great deal of satisfaction. It enabled me to travel throughout France. I made contacts with every French university, every French youth organization, the whole spectrum. And we developed special programs of seminars, lectures, exchanges. And the program grew and developed to the point where, in addition to contacts with French youth, we began contacts with youth of other countries, for which France, and particularly Paris, was a cultural sort of homeland, for Francophone Africans, for Asians, for Middle Easterners, for persons from Latin America, as well.

And then that led to the development of a cultural center in the Latin Quarter, on the Rue du Dragon, which developed a reputation for the quality of its programs and its outreach.

Q: And you were director of that?

AGGREY: And I was founding director of that center, between 1957 and 1960. While in Paris, I went on temporary detail to Vienna on one occasion, and I spent three months in Morocco, helping that post with some programs and projects.

Q: Well, after France, what was your assignment, Rudy?

AGGREY: After France, I returned to Washington. And I was asked to go on loan to the Department of State. Mennen Williams had just become the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, and he wanted me to join his staff. And the logical position, with my public affairs background, was as a member of his public affairs staff. So I became deputy director of that office.

Q: And you were there for how long?

AGGREY: I stayed in that position for three and a half years, during which time I made seven trips to Africa with the assistant secretary for African affairs. And we went, I think, to 45 different African countries. And we traveled by various means.

I'm, I guess, one of the few people who have been all the way to Madagascar in a DC-4 from Andrews Air Force Base. We met with the leaders of the new African countries, as well as the few that had been independent before 1960. It was a very important point in American diplomatic history and I was very pleased and privileged to have been a part of some of those early contacts.

In some of the places we went in French-speaking Africa, I ran into individuals I had known as students in Paris. Others were public officials I had met in France. Although my work there involved dealing primarily with youth, as a member of the Paris embassy and a member of USIA, I also worked with other people as well, in the media, the cultural sector, and beyond.

Q: G. Mennen Williams, also known as "Soapy" Williams, was one of the most colorful men to occupy that job. What was your impression of him?

AGGREY: He was a remarkable person. He was an extremely political individual, in the best sense of the word. He had an unusual skill for dealing with people of all stations of life. He was a strong believer in his country and in its potential and in the best of its institutions. And he was a very demanding boss, in a sense. In Washington, I did not work directly for him, except as a speech writer, but when we were on the trips, obviously, I did work directly for him.

Q: Well, that, then, carried on for how many years, again?

AGGREY: I left in 1964 to spend a year, the '64-'65 academic year, at Harvard, as a fellow in the Center for International Affairs. And I think I was the first USIA officer to be chosen. Previously, officers from State and from Air Force, Army, Navy, had been chosen as fellows. I was, in fact, invited by Harvard to go there, and USIA agreed and nominated me and allowed me to accept the appointment.

Q: Well, then finally back to work. And I believe that work was in Kinshasa.

AGGREY: Finally, I went to Kinshasa after the year at Harvard. In fact, I had done a paper at Harvard, which they wanted to publish as a book. But the Agency was anxious for me to return to work. And I was to have several assignments, but for various reasons, I ended by going to what was then Leopoldville, as the deputy public affairs officer in one of USIA's largest programs in Africa.

And there I worked, first, for John Mowinckel, who was the country public affairs officer, who had been the deputy public affairs officer during a part of my service in Paris. He was succeeded by George Hellyer, whom I had met in Brussels on my way to Kinshasa. They were men of different styles, but both effective and experienced public affairs officers. And I must say that both of them gave me great scope for operations and for work. And I didn't feel frustrated by not being “number one.”

Q: Well, then it was back to the States, was it?

AGGREY: Yes. I was married while I was in Kinshasa. And as my wife was a foreign national, it was necessary for us to return to the States on our next assignment. When we returned to the States, I was appointed as program manager for USIA's motion picture and television service.

Q: Now, was the Agency just getting into television about that time? Or was there already a foundation?

AGGREY: There was a foundation for it. In fact, we had a motion picture and television production unit in Kinshasa while I was there, more motion picture than television. But I worked with that unit and I developed an interest in film while I was there. So when I came back, it was a pleasure for me to continue and develop that interest.

Television we were getting into—we had been in film for many, many years—but television was sort of blossoming and moving up to parity with film in the Service, and we had a number of very interesting innovations, in which I participated, including the use of satellite to send programs to the field. I had the pleasure of being involved in USIA's coverage and satellite distribution of man's landing on the moon and, also, in the making of several films, which won awards and were very effective in the field. So here again, was another experience that I found very useful and interesting. And I don't know whether it's heredity or osmosis or what it is, but I have a daughter who's decided that she's going into film as a career.

Q: Good enough! That's fine. Well, you were there for roughly two years?

AGGREY: There for two years. And in 1970, David Newsom, who was assistant secretary of state for Africa—whom I had known in my previous job in the Department of State, when he was Deputy Director for North Africa and I was Deputy Director for Public Affairs—David Newsom asked me, and asked the Agency, if I could come to the Department to become director for West Africa. And the Agency allowed me to do that. And I came over and served from '70 to late-'73, at which time I was nominated by President Nixon to be ambassador to Senegal and The Gambia.

Q: That meant that you had spent a lot of good time in State, to be prepared for an ambassadorship. At least you knew the bureaucracy and some of the communications patterns and so on. So did you consider yourself well prepared for this ambassadorship?

AGGREY: I thought that I was well prepared for it because I had spent a total of about seven years in State in my two assignments. I had traveled widely in Africa. I knew its problems. I knew its people. At the same time, I had had to deal with U.S. interests in the Department of State, in a supervisory role for West Africa.

I knew the system. And I knew the personalities as well. So when I was proposed to the bureaucracy for the position, I had, in fact, briefed two previous ambassadors-designate to Senegal. And finally, the word came down, “Well, why not this man?”

Q: Sure. Well, how did you divide your time between Senegal and The Gambia?

AGGREY: We had a full-time charg# in The Gambia, who was a senior career officer. The first one who served with me was a senior officer. The next one was mid-career, transitioning to senior. I spent most of my time in Senegal. But I did go to The Gambia about once a month and when special events or circumstances dictated.

Q: Well, then comes an assignment which must have come to you out of the blue. And the more we read these days about Romania, the more questions I have about what it was like when you were assigned there as ambassador. That would have been in 1977?

AGGREY: Yes. Well, I've found, in my experience, that nothing is wasted, if you do it well. And that one thing can lead to, or prepare you for, another. And sometimes people who are impatient and wonder why they should do this particular job—that it ought to be short-circuited—find out later that they're very happy they did.

My learning French, after having thought that I had been given a raw deal on my exam, but going back and learning it, allowed me to be assigned to France and to have wonderful assignments and wonderful experiences. Having those experiences in Paris gave me a wide knowledge of Francophone African leaders, including the president of Senegal, and many other places. And when I went to Senegal, I was able to be efficient and I had many contacts that enabled me to do my job.

While I was working as director for West African affairs, my French was sufficient for me to do some interpreting at the White House. Among the persons I interpreted for was the president of Upper Volta, [Sangoul#] Lamizana. I sat on a jump seat behind him, and he sat between Mrs. Warren Burger and Mrs. William Rogers, respectively, the wives of the

Chief Justice and Secretary of State. To the right of Mrs. William Rogers, was Nicolae Ceausescu, the president, then, of the Social Republic of Romania. And Ceausescu's interpreter, a Romanian he brought with him, was seated next to him.

At the end of the dinner, as we were getting ready to leave and I was escorting President Lamizana, President Ceausescu came up and introduced himself. We spoke and I interpreted and I met his interpreter.

I mention all of that to describe my first important encounter with Romania and the Romanians, and that later I was to be accredited to a country where the person I had met at the White House dinner was President Ceausescu. And after his regime was toppled and, in fact, he was executed, one of the foreign ministers of the successor regime was the man who was his interpreter that evening.

Q: Oh, really? Is that so?

AGGREY: So I say that certain things are often connected in interesting ways. One of the first films we did, when I was program manager for motion pictures and television in USIA, was a cooperative film on President Nixon's visit to Romania. So I met the Romanian television team. I saw the images of the country. And I said to myself, “This is a place where I wouldn't mind serving.”

Now, at one point, speaking to the director general of the Foreign Service about where I might like to serve after I left Senegal, the question of Eastern Europe came up. And I said, “Well, I don't know that there's any place where I would really be especially effective. You have so many East European specialists. But if I had a change, perhaps Romania.”

And when the time came for me to leave Senegal, several new missions were mentioned. For many reasons I was not nominated for certain posts. I would not be assigned anywhere else in Africa because Secretary Kissinger had a policy of moving people out

of the region of their specialization. It was felt that I had earned another embassy on the basis of my work, but just where it would be outside Africa was a big question.

Several missions came up which would have pleased me. I won't mention them. But they didn't come about, for various reasons. And finally Romania was discussed, and the secretary of state decided that I should go to Romania. There were some people in the Department who felt strongly that I should not, as there always are, particularly when the move is from one region to another.

But I did go to Romania and I spent almost four years there. Everything that I had learned previously helped me there, and I wasn't as lost in that world as many people thought I would be. My French gave me access—not facility, but access—to learning Romanian, which I had to do. I was more than fifty at that time, and learning a foreign language, at that age, is not as easy as it is when you are in your twenties. But I learned it well because I needed it.

Also, Ceausescu had visited Senegal while I was there. President Senghor had introduced me to him. And President Ceausescu said that he had a special representative in Washington at that very moment. Pictures were taken of the three of us, which were part of the news coverage of Ceausescu's visit. So that I'm sure that when the Romanians began to say, “Who is this Aggrey that as ambassador they're proposing?” somebody would say, “Oh, maybe he was that black ambassador that we met in Senegal, who Senghor said so much about.” So I wasn't an unknown quantity.

So I think that I had two wonderful opportunities in serving in Senegal and The Gambia, and in Romania. And I feel fortunate to have had each post—overseas post—that I had. There were some others that I would have liked to have had, that I didn't get, like nearly everybody in the Service. But I think I had a very rewarding array of posts and assignments.

Q: Following Romania, you had two years in Georgetown?

AGGREY: Yes. Following Romania, I came back to the States. It had been a change in administrations. And before I left Romania, I was told that I was going to get a third mission, that I would actually get a call from the president. And then I was called to say, “We're sorry. That didn't work out.” So when I finally came back, nothing was worked out. And since I had been—had served for a number of years, it was felt it was time for me to take an assignment as diplomat in residence at a university. One in Louisiana had been proposed before I came back, but I said that our daughter had gone to three different schools during seven and in two different languages and we would like for her to deepen her roots in Washington if we had to have a stateside assignment.

Q: And then what followed after that?

AGGREY: Following Georgetown University, I returned to the Department, to the office of research for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. And I spent six months there, working on a special project dealing with the Warsaw Pact, before I retired after 33 years in the Foreign Service.

Q: That brings us to the present. As you were talking, I was thinking about how valuable all this experience has been in your present job, or must be important to you—useful to you, at least. Can you tell us what your responsibilities are today, here at Howard University?

AGGREY: Well, at present, since July 1, I have been the executive director of Howard University Press, which is the scholarly publishing arm of Howard University. It is a press which publishes not only books, but is involved in the publishing of three scholarly journals, which appear at Howard: The Journal of Negro Education, which is the oldest of the three; The Journal of Religious Thought, which is published by the school of divinity; and most recently, The Howard Journal of Communications.

Howard has a school of communications, offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, not only in various media studies, but in communications arts and sciences, as well. That is such things as speech therapy, helping persons to learn how to articulate after they have had strokes or physical accidents, as well as communications arts in the sense of intercultural communications.

So before I came full time to be the executive director, for two and a half years I was also employed as director of the Patricia Roberts Harris Public Affairs Program at Howard. That program has as its aim to enhance the ability of Howard students to be exposed to—and hopefully to opt for—careers across the spectrum of public service and public affairs vocations.

For that I put together an advisory council of persons very prominent in public affairs, including the editor of the National Geographic, members of Congress from both parties, journalists, former ambassadors, and so forth; and a steering committee of students, staff, faculty. And with these interlocking groups, we developed a program of lectures, seminars, internships, and exchanges involving Howard and other selected universities with different demographic bases.

The aim of the program is to expose our students to possibilities for work in public policy, in public affairs, in international affairs; students whose backgrounds or predilections may not have led them to such a choice, because they wouldn't know that the choice existed. But by being exposed to the program, they might decide to enter the Foreign Service in State, in USIA, or in USAID or to work for the Federal Reserve system or to become involved in the foreign operations of the Chase Manhattan Bank, for example. The aim is to expand the possibility of involvement of students at Howard in public affairs and, ultimately, by extension, hopefully, of other students.

Patricia Harris, who was the first African American woman ambassador—she was ambassador to Luxembourg, before becoming Secretary of Housing and Urban

Development, and, finally, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare—left in her will a sum to begin this program.

I had been a consultant to Howard on international affairs. I was asked by the president, after completing that assignment—and by the vice president for academic affairs—to launch the Harris program. And then, happily, in one of these almost unique situations, I was able to be succeeded after two years by another person with background in USIA —a former Assistant Director for Africa, former country PAO in the Philippines, former ambassador to Botswana—Horace Dawson, who is now Director of the Harris Public Affairs Program.

Q: I see.

AGGREY: I have seldom relinquished a post with such complete satisfaction in the succession.

Q: Sure. Well, it's quite clear from what you've said that you've drawn heavily upon your experience in the government as you go about your duties now.

AGGREY: Well, yes. And I must say that, like most Foreign Service officers—many of them— when they retire, are not really ready. And for some of them, it becomes a traumatic experience. And in a sense I wasn't ready. Although I took the option when I did, I felt I had much more still to give my country and the Foreign Service and that I could have served well in a number of places. In fact, I was even anxious to do that.

But once the decision was made, I accepted it. And now I'm really happy that it came when it did, because I had a full career, I enjoyed it, and I'm still vital enough to be able to pass on and to share some of the wonderful experiences and knowledge that I acquired working for our government, and hopefully to contribute to the development of future public servants.

Q: Any final overall observations that you'd like to make on your career, or on the way the government treated you, or the way the local employees influenced you or helped you? Anything at all that might summarize your feelings about it.

AGGREY: Well, I think there are several things I would like to say. First of all, I felt that I had to fight during my complete experience in the government and in the Foreign Service. But I felt, from beginning to end, that there were quality people in the Foreign Service who accepted me for what I was, who helped me go as far as I could. And I went beyond where many of them had gone. And they could have done something, at that juncture, to put a logjam in my progress. And I still respect those individuals. And I would, today, be very happy to work for them.

But being an American, and being an African American, I always felt that my country should strive for perfection in every respect. And so I never really accepted it when people told me I was lucky, or that I'd had a wonderful career and I shouldn't be dissatisfied. That didn't mean that I wasn't satisfied with my career. It meant that I wouldn't accept a “subjective ceiling” because I didn't think that as a nation, or as a representative of our nation, I should accept that. So I divide my appreciation.

In USIA I really worked with some of the best professionals I have known in public diplomacy, in many circumstances, whether it was on TDY in Vienna, or in Paris, or in Washington.

One assignment we didn't mention, and that was between Harvard and Kinshasa. For six months, I was director of the French branch in the VOA.

Q: Oh, I didn't know that.

AGGREY: And I certainly wouldn't want to leave that out, because I thoroughly enjoyed that assignment. I went in the Foreign Service as a State Department officer and I left it as a State Department officer. I was transferred to State while I was in Romania, although

the papers had been in process a long, long time. It wasn't that I was anxious to leave USIA, or to come to State, but it developed that, more and more, my assignments and my interest were in State. And that transfer was recommended by the then under secretary of state.

But there was also a period when I was kind of in limbo. I no longer belonged to USIA, and everybody in State didn't know that I belonged to them, or weren't that happy about it if I did. [Laughter] So that's another insight.

The Foreign Service helped me become a better person. I got to see a great deal of the world. I got a chance to see the universality of the human being affirmed for me. I always felt that way because of my early upbringing, my family background, my growing up in North Carolina, which was very distinctly segregated, but where I knew that there weren't any differences between peoples except in their quality, so I didn't have to be persuaded. I had no complexes, either, of inferiority or superiority, this enabled me, I think, to move through some difficult periods and to have wonderful associations.

Q: You would recommend a career in the Foreign Service for young black Americans today?

AGGREY: I would recommend it, yes. I would recommend it for them, as a general principle. I would want to talk with them individually to see whether I would think that it was for the individual. Because while I think that the world has made a lot of progress, and the United States has made a lot of progress, I'm not sure that the Foreign Service has made as much progress as a personnel operation, as have other sectors of our society.

Today young African Americans have other options. Progress is going to be slower for them in the Foreign Service than it will be in some other sectors. And while I had the personality and the experience and the personal poise to live with that, many young people—African American, European American, Asian American, Hispanic American—

today, do not have that. They're impatient. And for the Foreign Service, in general, there is a problem of getting not only the qualified people, but the best of the qualified people.

Q: Well, I thank you very much, Rudy. This has been a very pleasant interview for me. And I've gotten to get reacquainted with you.

AGGREY: Well, it's a pleasure for me, too. In my career I remember the names of the big PAOs, and Jack O'Brien is certainly among them.

End of interview